

The Hearst Corporation
The Times Union (Albany, New York)

May 14, 2006 Sunday

Gas prices forcing lawmakers to switch

Sweeney and others pressured to require better vehicle mileage

By **JUDY HOLLAND** Times Union Washington bureau

WASHINGTON - With gasoline prices topping \$3 a gallon, Rep. John Sweeney and other Republican lawmakers are feeling voter pressure to switch gears and embrace higher fuel economy standards for passenger cars and light trucks such as minivans and SUVs.

Sweeney, R-Clifton Park, who previously opposed higher mileage standards because he didn't want to hamper the auto industry or meddle with the free market, says he now supports raising federal mileage standards - known as Corporate Average Fuel Economy, or CAFE standards - to help Americans "discipline" themselves about gas consumption.

"I feel we have to put in place policies so we don't keep feeding the (gasoline) habit," says Sweeney, who admits to driving a gas-guzzling SUV.

Sweeney says support for higher mileage standards is "building momentum" in Congress.

"We're going to have to force ourselves to accept certain sacrifices along the way," Sweeney says. "A laissez-faire approach isn't going to work here."

Sweeney says the \$3-a-gallon prices at the pump "is painful to our constituents" and was the "straw that broke the camel's back" and convinced him that higher mileage standards were needed.

Sweeney is backing legislation by Rep. Sherwood Boehlert, R-New Hartford, who chairs the House Science Committee, and Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., which would require automakers to produce vehicles by 2015 that average 33 miles per gallon for passenger cars and light trucks, such as SUVs, minivans and pickup trucks. Currently the law requires automakers to meet a fleetwide average of 27.5 mpg for passenger cars but not light trucks like SUVs.

Similar legislation has failed in the House three times since 2001, but Boehlert says the mood has changed.

"Everybody is talking about CAFE now," Boehlert says. "It wasn't on the radar screen for members before. CAFE is on the minds of the leadership. They know the issue is high profile and they are facing an election that has every prospect of being a nail biter."

A February Pew Research Center poll showed 86 percent of Americans favor requiring better fuel efficiency for cars, trucks and SUVs.

In addition to Sweeney, other lawmakers who have dropped their opposition to higher standards include Reps. Michael Bilirakis, R-Fla., Michael Castle, R-Del., and Randy Kuhl, R-N.Y.

The issue will get attention this week when the House considers legislation by Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas, chair of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, which would grant the president the authority to create a new fuel efficiency system for passenger cars but would not set a specific mpg target or timeline.

Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta, who would oversee such a new fuel efficiency system, told a Senate hearing last week that he wants to create a system with different fuel economy targets, one for big cars and one for small cars, instead of a imposing a fleet-wide average.

Mineta said his goal is to "improve fuel efficiency by requiring manufacturers to apply fuel-saving technologies rather than giving them an incentive to build smaller cars," as the current fleetwide program does.

Advocates of tougher mileage standards face fierce opposition. Auto manufacturers say tougher fuel economy standards would cost American jobs and force them to make cars that are lighter and less safe.

But Billy Pizer, a senior fellow with Resources for the Future, an independent Washington research group, says automakers are capable of making more fuel-efficient cars that are also safe.

"Everybody agrees the technology is there to raise fuel economy standards but the question is whether it is cost-effective," Pizer says.

Boehlert says arguments that requiring higher fuel efficiency will endanger lives are "as phony as a \$3 bill."

One skeptic in Congress, Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, says federal standards aren't necessary because high gas prices naturally prompt conservation and more efficient automobiles.

"If there are any auto manufacturers in the world who are not looking at making cars more gas efficient, they'll soon be out of business," Craig says. "If we push too hard, we'll get plastic cars in the end."

Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss., says he and lawmakers from other auto manufacturing states will "fight like a tiger" any attempts to boost fuel efficiency standards as high as 32 or 40

miles per gallon.

Lott said he purchased a British-made Mini Cooper to set an example of one who doesn't burn too much gas, but he doesn't like it and wouldn't wish it on anyone else.

"You're not going to make the American people drive a European half car," Lott says.